

Naming of the Cheyney, Pennsylvania Post Office for late Captain Luther H. Smith, Jr. one step closer to becoming law

March 10, 2010

WASHINGTON, DC— The House of Representatives today passed legislation to name the Cheyney, Pennsylvania Post Office in the honor of the late Captain Luther H. Smith Jr. Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-07) introduced the legislation in late January and it quickly garnered support from the entire Pennsylvania delegation in the House. The legislation passed by voice vote and now heads for the Senate for their consideration.

The bill, HR 4547, honors the memory of a great American hero, Captain Luther H. Smith, Jr., U.S. Army Air Forces, by designating the Post Office at 119 Station Road in Cheyney, Pennsylvania in Delaware County as the “Captain Luther H. Smith, U.S. Army Air Forces Post Office.”

“Captain Smith was a member of a unique group of men who possessed an unabashed devotion to this nation and a belief in the strength of American values, even at a time when their country’s laws failed to reflect the values for which they fought,” said Congressman Sestak. “I was honored to be able to submit this legislation and provide a means of recognizing the life of Captain Smith, who is an inspiration to future generations.”

Captain Smith was one of the original Tuskegee Airmen, a highly decorated World War II prisoner of war, a recipient of the Congressional Gold Medal, the first African-American aerospace engineer hired by General Electric in its Missile and Space Operations in Philadelphia, a loving husband and father, and a longtime resident of Villanova, PA.

He was born in Des Moines, Iowa on September 27, 1920. His early dreams to serve as a military aviator were fulfilled when he joined the U.S. Army Air Forces and began training at Alabama’s Tuskegee Army Air Field and Tuskegee Institute. One of the first African Americans to become a licensed pilot, Captain Smith began his military career in 1943. He flew 133 combat missions with the 332nd Fighter Group as a combat fighter pilot over Europe. He was severely wounded on his last mission on Friday, October 13, 1944, when he was shot down over Hungary and captured by enemy soldiers. He spent the next seven months in enemy hospitals and prison camps before being liberated in May 1945 by the Allied forces. During his distinguished military career, Captain Smith destroyed 2 German aircraft in aerial conflicts and 10 aircraft in ground strafing attacks. Captain Smith was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal with 6 Oak Leaf Clusters, the Purple Heart, the Prisoner of War Medal, and 8 European Theater Campaign Ribbons.

After retiring from the U.S. Army Air Forces, Captain Smith completed his engineering education at the University of Iowa, earning a B.S. in mechanical engineering. He was hired by General Electric where he was involved in projects for the Air Force, the Navy Submarine Command, and NASA. His work included missile and jet engine design and he published numerous papers and was awarded two patents.

Following his retirement from GE in 1988, Captain Smith was active in support of local civic

causes, serving as the vice-chairman of the Radnor Township (PA) School Board and on the Board of the Delaware County (PA) Community College.

He also was instrumental in capturing the history of the Tuskegee Airmen – so that present and future generations of Americans could understand their significance. He believed passionately that “racial equality in America started in the skies over Europe.” He and two other Tuskegee Airmen were featured in the 2006 Documentary “On Freedom’s Wings: Bound for Glory, the Legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen.” He also designed the plaque dedicated in memory of the Tuskegee Airmen in Arlington National Cemetery. In May 1995, he was selected by President Bill Clinton to represent the U.S. Air Force for the 50th Anniversary Celebration of VE Day and accompanied President Clinton and Vice-President Gore to Europe.

Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of “Deep Blue,” the Navy’s anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the “Global War on Terrorism.” He served as President Clinton’s Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the U.S. Congress.

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